

NO DECONSTRUCTION BEFORE MARRIAGE?

Reading Philosophy

When a theorist declares in the last five minutes of her interview, “I am an outsider to philosophy,” some undergraduate philosophy journal editors might get worried — but the force of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work may help assuage those doubts. Though Professor Spivak studied Comparative Literature under acclaimed critic Paul de Man, her first major publication made an indelible mark on the discipline of philosophy.

Professor Spivak became known to the anglophone academy in 1976, with her translation of Jacques Derrida’s *De la grammatologie*. Her subsequent books, including *Outside in the Teaching Machine* and *The Post-Colonial Critic*, all feature her “para-disciplinary” approach to philosophy, literature, and transnational issues.

This past August, I met Professor Spivak in a café near Columbia University where she serves as the Avalon Foundation professor. We discussed her most recent book, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard UP, 1999). Over the last several years, post-colonial studies has emerged as a hydra-headed monster of theory of inclusion. Spivak’s work seeks to incorporate and revise this movement, testing it against its own unruly limits. Her *Critique* begins with a chapter named simply “Philosophy,” a name hardly capturing the scope of her project or the dynamic interdisciplinary avenues she paves for the next generation of theorists.

— Jason Boog

with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

an interview by JASON BOOG

Jason Boog ● Your book begins with **Kant** and ends with **activism**. Why begin such a broad trajectory with a chapter named “Philosophy”? Or, more specifically, why choose Kant’s *Critique of Teleological Reason* to find the “native informant” excluded from all the different systems of knowledge that your book addresses?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ● The idea of the book started in the late Seventies. Three graduate students and I read Kant together at the University of Texas. We made this astonishing discovery that in the *Critique of Teleological Reason* there was an actual naming of certain aboriginal groups as **not sufficient as examples of human beings**. As I started to read more, I saw that Kant was not thinking this for the very first time; this was part of the debate at the time. He was just giving a non-empirical answer. Since *I* began there, it seemed right to begin **the book** there as a kind of narrative move.

JB: Do you think that as the undergraduate philosophy student learns **Kant**, figures like those “aboriginal groups” need to be exposed during that initial becoming-familiar with the text? What degree of familiarity is needed before the philosophy student should read critically for such “answers” in the history of philosophy?

GCS: I think one can be aware of these critical moments only if one knows that which is being critiqued from the inside — sympathetically. It is a mistake to dismiss Kant. Certainly my chapter tries to show that Kant was a very great philosopher and a very useful philosopher indeed. What we are seeing is how it is that even in our best moments (which probably in any way will not approach Kant’s best moments) we are still bound — we are *normed* — by certain kinds of histories.

Paul **de Man** once said, apparently — Fred **Jameson** quoted this to me (so I am quoting a quote) — “**You can only deconstruct what you love.**” I believe that. You need to have a certain critical intimacy when you are doing this kind of thing. I am troubled by the idea that people dismiss great writing without enough care. On the other hand, I cannot fail to mark the moment, as *living in our history*. You’ve put your finger on something important.

JB: You write about **Hegel’s** sense of history: “If as literary critics and teachers, we could have taught ourselves and our students the way to informed figurations of that ‘lost’ perspective, then the geopolitical postcolonial situation could have served as something like a paradigm for the thought of history itself as figuration, figuring something out with “chunks of the real” (Spivak 65). Once a philosophy student establishes “critical intimacy” with such crucial texts in philosophy, how can they begin to look for such invisible, impossible figures in history?

GCS: I am just saying that there is no way that one could actually recapture this lost perspective. *All we have is figurations.* Therefore, when we think of the writing of history we have to realize that what is happening is also a figured narrative — although what is being offered as part of the narrative is being offered as real.

This makes historians a little cross. But, not all historians would ignore this. Partha Chatterjee would agree with this. My colleague Simon Schama here at Columbia would agree

GCS: with this. If one just *celebrates* the hybrid as a kind of essence, then there is a figure over against which the hybrid is a hybrid which then undermines the idea of hybridity.

Therefore, there is no such figure to be found — we only have repeated figurations of that “purity,” even of the “hybrid as such.” Another name for it is the “*truth*” of an account. And the figuration is, in some sense, how the truth is produced. So then one could say any description of historiographic method can also be seen as a description of figuring out. This is how you **figure it out**.

JB: I want to get some sense of the “Vanishing Present” you include in the title of your new book — the way that contemporary theory has to look at itself with a new “vigilance.” How can this rigor be brought into the university? As the legacies of multiculturalism and deconstruction change the boundaries between disciplines, it would seem that the crowded playing field of theory would resist any attempts to form mechanisms of consistent “vigilance.”

GCS: I don’t really know how it can be brought successfully into the university. Obviously one person can’t do it. I can talk about attempts. Here at Columbia we are trying to establish painstakingly a Center for Comparative Literature and Society. It’s been in action for a year. I think what we are trying to see is that the old, traditional comparative literary skills, the emphasis on language — not only on language *but on idiom* — should also apply to non-European languages. One can’t just do multicultural stuff in English, one should in fact try to bring those standards into the study of areas other than what comparative literature has so far covered.

Your university, indeed, is a pathbreaker in this respect. It has a model that’s quite interesting for people like us. At the same time, the old Area Studies initiatives were put into place after the Second World War for the United States to get in touch with the rest of the world. That inception was consolidated by the National Defense Education Act of 1958. Those were highly interdisciplinary endeavors. But those Area Studies institutions had no particular interest in the skill and care that comparative literature gave to the study of the languages, to learn them **RESPONSIBLY** rather than **INSTRUMENTALLY**.

GCS: So very practically, what we are trying to do here is bring those two — the interdisciplinary resources of Area Studies and the traditional skills of Comparative Literature — together; so that we can indeed keep our eyes and ears open in terms of the political economy of knowledge as we do the humanities. And be aware of the irreducibility of idiom in the consciousnesses and depths of other civilizations studied. As we do the social sciences, such thoughts “enrich” and “problematize” rational expectations, let’s say. From these two ends one could say something about what this new work might look like. But making institutional change is an uphill battle, so this is practically utopian. **But it is an answer.**

JB: Your book contains very fluid lines of discipline, traveling between political science, literature, psychoanalysis, and others — all in a chapter named “Philosophy.” How can we think and learn about the disciplined rigors of philosophy when theory requires this new sort of scholarship utilizing the interdisciplinary skills you addressed?

GCS: We need team teaching. The way we were prepared as teachers we may have interdisciplinary goals and interests, but each has one disciplinary training. This morning I received an e-mail from Jack **Snyder**, the chairman of political science here. He and I are going to teach together a course on narrative in ethics and politics. He is a political scientist, very much of a rationalist thinking. It was very interesting to see that he likes the piece of writing I gave him, but at the end he says, “But this is finally **not useful.**”

I know when I read his stuff again I will like his quality and I will learn a lot. But at the end of the day, if I have any conviction I will say, **“Hey that’s not the way to do it. It leaves too much out.”** So when you do interdisciplinary work you need to do it with people who have disciplinary convictions and engage, rather than some kind of Mickey Mouse playing at another discipline in which one is not trained.

I’m looking forward to teaching with Professor Snyder because neither of us will give ground simply out of some kind of academic courtesy. We will say, **“If you want to teach me something, you must earn the right to teach me something. I won’t throw away my convictions simply because you say so.”**

This is good for students. I think we need a lot of team teaching. We need a lot of good faculty development. What we don’t need is the kind of mocking dismissal that is a sure sign of academic insecurity.

JB: Maybe we could look at a specifically interdisciplinary moment in your book where you discuss the philosophical foundation of *Jane Eyre* via **Kant’s** Categorical Imperative. Through this philosophical turn you expose a racial “tangent” in the book that might not appear through a purely “literary reading.” Will such moments become the site of future theoretical activity using our new interdisciplinary resources, the kind of sites philosophy students should look at now?

GCS: I think so. One must take up risks. And here one takes the risk of making what may be a mistake in terms of disciplinary methodology.

I had my own problems with **Althusser**, as all feminists must. Yet what he said about **Lenin**, in 1968 if I’m not wrong, is instructive. Althusser had said that Lenin “gave a wild response to philosophy” (*une réponse sauvage*). “Wild” is a slightly misleading translation. “Savage” would have been wrong also. There could have been no other translation. But nonetheless, that’s idiom — it is so irreducible.

Then he surmised that philosophy cannot bear interaction with politics because it has to live on politics. That kind of mistake — that **“wildness”** — you must know how to make it, how to be it. In order to be able play a game well, you need to know how to play to lose. Just knowing the rules will not make sure you can play. Just being able to play the game does not make sure that you can win. Just being able always to play to win does not mean that you can deliberately risk having to lose in order to teach.

So in that sense, yes, I think those risks have to be taken in order to show up something. Almost, as it were, to keep the move into the reflexive and the autonomous suspended — and say, **“I WILL make the mistake of NOT making that move to solve my problem.”**

JB: In the chapter named “History” in your new book, you take a narrative departure from your theoretical style to tell about one of your visits to India. The scene exposes the “impossible” narrative of Rani, an Indian woman foreclosed from historical record (Spivak 239-244). I think **Hegel’s** sense of history was just as responsible for her foreclosure from history as the British archives. Where did the idea of this method come from? What are the implications of this method for the future writing of philosophy?

GCS: What I was trying to do there was to make the method of knowing into a storyline, *within the account*. In **Derrida's** *Glasp* such a move is performed in another way as Derrida looks at how Hegel comes to his way of thinking about the family. It's not just knowing the politics of knowing (as in Althusser on Lenin) but making the knowing into a *storyline*, instantiating the *knowing as a narrative*.

That is a response, but I'm not writing a philosophy book, so I'm allowed this as long as I can keep the reader interested — as long as the reader feels that something comes out of these acts against the disciplinary grain.

JB: You call **Coetzee's** novel *Foe* "interventionist writing," a kind of intersection between theory and literary work? Can this kind of writing help students think about theory, helping us find new sites for study? How do such pieces influence your own work?

GCS: I believe so. But in a certain sense, my expertise is a hindrance there. If there is one thing I have been taught to do by excellent teachers, it is to read literature. And I'm not going to throw it away. The book is dedicated to two of my teachers, and I have had other excellent teachers of reading.

So to an extent, **I almost cannot make a naïve enough "mistake"** in literary reading. I'm a bit muscle-bound, in other words. I think I have been most successfully able to make a "mistake," as it were, in a literary reading, in my Baudelaire reading where I put in how Baudelaire's narrative is about knowing a *négresse*, not just satisfying the literary historian. **It is from his life.** And I think long ago, in an essay which was included in *In Other Worlds*, an essay on Wordsworth's book *The Prelude* on the French Revolution, I was also able to make a real mistake, a useful, productive mistake.

Generally my reading of *Foe* is too expert. Precisely because Coetzee himself, after all, is a considerable theorist, so that he has a literary text that theorizes as it narrates. Room for making a powerful mistake is almost not there.

JB: Do you think interventionist writing can play a valuable role in the new curriculum you are talking about?

GCS: Not unless the teacher has a very thorough knowledge of that within which it intervenes. It is a mistake to teach interventionist literature simply as examples of political correctness. I see that happening too often. The very interventionist edge is blunted. Here, faculty development is very important. Bad teaching is taken for

GCS: granted because everybody is afraid to say that the teaching is bad when it is politically correct. Again, *team teaching*.

Here at this university, we are trying to establish a writer-in-residence fellowship for a writer in an indigenous African language. I would want such a teacher to be present in the class where an unprepared postcolonial teacher is teaching text after text from various parts of the world with no real knowledge of history, a kind of politically correct "**BAD-WHITES/GOOD-BLACKS**" mindset. I would like that to be informed by... Let me give you an example. I'm just coming back from India. Last week, an Indian woman writing a dissertation on V.S. **Naipaul** interviewed me for an English-language national news daily. She took me to this extremely opulent, colonial club in Calcutta. Her father was the director of a large tea company and has a membership. I've never been inside that club. She was talking about how the colonials were racist, and so on.

And I started laughing. I said, "Look around yourself. How can you make that statement, sitting here willingly, in a country that has been postcolonial for fifty years and say that they were racist?" Why do we follow those lines of behavior so implicitly, when we can very easily not do so? We must know, in some sense, the history of the present in the various postcolonial countries in order to be able to teach these kinds of texts.

JB: You hold major players in theory from Frederick **Jameson** to Richard **Rorty** accountable in your book. Should philosophy students learn such a "vigilant" stance as they first encounter contemporary theory? Should the undergraduate ask such sophisticated questions of contemporary theory in our courses?

GCS: Yes, but don't forget the need for establishing critical intimacy. I think undergraduate work should be more devoted to establishing the critical intimacy. I'm not saying that we should not critique. I teach history of literary criticism at the undergraduate level where I certainly advance to a kind of critique toward the end of the class. But I begin by inviting the students to enter into a very intimate and admiring relationship with the criticism of **Wordsworth** and **Shelley** and **Coleridge** and **Pater** and so on until **Arnold**. They're a bit surprised at the beginning of the semester that I teach with so much passion these writers that they don't expect me to like.

But I do think that undergraduate work should establish the love, then can move towards deconstruction. In that sense, I ask my graduate students always to ask themselves when they're reading, "**CUI BONO?**" — "In what interest?" "For whom is this book?" That is salutary.

GCS: I had a book launch for *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* published by an Indian press. I always publish all my books also for South Asian distribution, since the price there is much more affordable. I had a book launch there for the India editions. And there was a man there, he's a professor too and makes this objection regularly. He was trying to say that since he was a local, what he had to say was silenced by people of my ilk.

I started laughing, I said, "You know if my graduate students were sitting here right now, they would immediately ask, "In what interest is this being said?": "Love me, I'm a local, I'm the real thing." It applies everywhere, not just to the metropolis, but also to the so-called "Global South."

In what interest? But that to me is a question that's asked after the undergraduate endeavor to enter into the text as if written by oneself, as it were.

JB: In *The Post-Colonial Critic*, all the interviewers kept asking for an outline of this book. The product is much different than your original sketches, and you make it clear that revision played an important role in the product. Do you suggest such self-conscious revision as a new kind of tool for philosophical writing?

GCS: I don't recommend my model. It's almost as if I couldn't do anything else because of the kind of book it was and that's where those very long narrative footnotes tried to keep pace with where the argument was becoming too outdated because the virtual reality of global political economy was moving so fast. Also, I myself began with the assumptions of post-colonial discourse.

Most of the interviews in that book were given in the first half of the eighties, and that was when I had discovered the incredible hold on rational knowledge that colonialism still had. After I had moved through that period, the book was still called *Master Discourse: Native Informant*. That binary opposition began to lose itself already. And also, 1987 was the year that *Post-Colonial Critic* came out, I believe. That was the year when I first taught for a semester and more in India. The experience of teaching postcolonials rather than Eurocentric economic migrants really taught me something.

My first cousin just told me this true story about two related families from West Bengal. One living in Bombay, which is already far away, and the other living in Scotland. The Bombay family has gone to visit the Scotland branch of the family.

The little girl in the family from Bombay is speaking in English. The boy in the family from Scotland says to her: "Hey, don't speak in English at home, my mother will be cross. We are Bengalis." Then the Bombay girl says: "No. We must speak in

GCS: English, because if we don't speak in English at home I won't be able to get admission into English-speaking schools. I will not get ahead in life." Okay now, this is the scenario. This is a true story, and anybody who knows the scene knows that this is absolutely "authentic." The upper middle class local is preparing for Eurocentric migration through the English language school in India, so that, having arrived, the metropolitan agenda of multiculturalism says, "**Speak Bengali at home. We are Bengalis.**"

WE ARE ALWAYS HYPHENATED. The cultural claim is made once that geopolitical future is secured. That's the kind of agenda that I began to realize, "as the world turned," to coin a phrase. Therefore, it is a very different book from what I could announce in the early eighties.

JB: In the last chapter you introduce your "hypothetical reader," the metropolitan migrant woman just about to enter positions of power in the next century — the women whose identities are most threatened by the assimilating forces of Eurocentric migration. How did the revisions from your original scheme and your experiences teaching in India produce your idea of a "hypothetical reader?" Can you talk about the figure of your hypothetical reader as it emerged from the revision process?

GCS: That boy in Scotland? To him I would say **NO, it's not because you are Bengali.** It's a good idea to speak it to keep the language alive, but not for identity claims. I will ask him to do the fieldwork necessary to be able to read literature and writing in its idiomaticity.

Again, I'm fresh out of India, I just came back yesterday, so I'm talking a lot about some of the things I did. I was asked by a Bengali-language daily to give an interview on a statement made by a writer called Khushwant **Singh**. He wrote *The Last Train to Pahlistan*, a very well-known novel quite often taught in courses here.

He said that the National Academy of Letters should be disbanded, and, I believe, that writers should be left to the free market and the survival of the fittest — a silly sort of social Darwinism, really deplorable. Then he also says — he writes himself in English — that English has a kind of subtlety as a medium of narration that none of the Indian languages possesses. This is a vague echo of the **Rushdie** statement in the *New Yorker* last June that all writing in the Indian languages is parochial.

My interview was in Bengali, one of the regional languages. I said, "There's no need for me to prove my devotion to English, but I must say that this says more about Khushwant Singh and the limits of his knowledge than anything about English over the regional languages." I gave the interview in Calcutta, and it came out last Sunday. There was a great deal of discussion, I was told, but I left for Delhi.

GCS: I got some phone calls from Calcutta saying that people were discussing what I had said. And then I got a phone call from Delhi and someone said, “Professor Spivak, yes indeed what you have said is very apropos, but of course, all the armchair critics who have this opinion without much knowledge of the regional languages or the literatures, *they won’t read your interview* because it’s in one of the regional languages.”

So then Harish Trivedi, the head of the English department at Delhi University, had a conversation with me and said, “I’m going to have this translated into English and I’m going to offer a headnote, making the point that if the regional languages were incapable of subtlety, how is it that this spirited rejoinder is produced in one of the regional languages? I’m going to print it in one of the English language dailies.”

Now this is the kind of thing I would say to the hybrid boy or girl in Scotland. **Don’t learn the language for some sort of authentic identity claim only available to the hyphenated Bengali.**

Learn it so you can use it as a *critical tool*. The Center for Comparative Literature and Society is for learning the non-metropolitan languages well with the old comparative literature skills.

JB: When your hypothetical reader is exposed in the fourth chapter, you also speak of the possibility of activism available to your hypothetical reader. I was wondering how we could think of activism on a *global* level through your clearly *theoretical* work in the book?

GCS: I don’t think any book is going to do that. The book can talk about it. In order for this to work, one will have to engage in work other mode from what is available in a book. This has to be absolutely clear: I’m describing the situation, in order for someone to engage with it.

I AM TRYING TO STATE THE PROBLEM. Because the benevolent transnationally illiterate liberal has a certain degree of sanctioned ignorance, it’s possible not to acknowledge the existence of certain kinds of resistance. So it’s educative to that degree. But it’s a bit hopeless to imagine that a book such as mine can actually influence action, when the available models of activism are restricted in various ways.

The very last paragraph of my book talks about the fact that there is a great deal of activist literature available which theorists don’t read. The pronouncements made by a person like Paul Virilio show ignorance of actually existing global resistance. In the afterword to a forthcoming volume of *Subaltern Studies*, I talk about Paul Rabinow’s discussion of bio-power and how it doesn’t seem to know at all that for twenty years this global resistance against genetic engineering has been keeping pace with how genetic engineering itself has been advancing.

JB: Do you think this new team teaching and other academic changes set the stage for a new sense of activism; an activism between the theoretical work of philosophy and the new interdisciplinary resources of social sciences, for example?

GCS: I am an **outsider** to philosophy. I’ve never had a philosophy course, undergraduate or graduate, so you are talking to someone who is ignorant of what they teach. I can say something with little responsible experience of academic philosophy. Of course I am interested in a certain kind of philosophizing, the kind I made it my business to learn a bit — is one where we always ask what the *bracket* is for in certain kinds of philosophic inquiry. But one mustn’t think of that as final. It is the dismantling of a certain style of philosophizing that seems most important, but only after we have learned to work at, play in, and love that reasonable style. I can’t tell you anything in great detail. By contrast, within my disciplinary enclosure I can give endless practical details. Once, when I spoke on literature and cultural studies for the Modern Language Association conference, people said to me, “My god, you talked about everything!”

Well, I’ve been in this literature trade for a very long time. Speaking about philosophy is exactly the opposite for me. But, nonetheless, I have tried to indicate the general thing one wants to see happen in the training of the new philosopher. What I mind very much, and this is true all over the world as far as I have traveled: the philosopher takes shelter in the remark, “I don’t understand.” Meaning: **“You don’t fulfill the conditions of intelligibility.”** I think that must go, and that change of mind is no mean achievement.

Work at it, if you can.